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ABSTRACT

This paper describes aspects of a program at Sammons Elementary School (Houston, Texas) designed to create a learning community that includes preservice teacher education students, practicing teachers, university faculty, and Sammons students and parents. The school has been designated as an Urban Professional Development Site for the Sam Houston State University Center for Professional Development (SHCPD). The site receives federal Title VII Transitional Bilingual Education funds. These funds help to support the community education focus of the program, which includes a major effort to engage parents of linguistically diverse students in encouraging and supporting their children's learning environment. University and school personnel collaborate on two major goals: improving student performance and preparing preservice students for authentic teaching. The paper includes an overview of several elements of the preservice program: curriculum, technology-based activities, field experience, bilingual and multicultural education. The Saturday School at Sammons (SSS), a 10-week Saturday program for parents and children, is the central component of the overall program's parent support services. Parents receive English as a Second Language classes and computer training. In addition to Sam Houston University, Texas A&M University is a partner in SSS, and preservice teachers and university professors from both institutions plan and prepare SSS lessons. (Contains 13 references.) (IAH)

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Community Learning:
A Field-Based Education Model

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by

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Community Learning:
A Field-Based Education Model

On a typical Tuesday afternoon, Roberto, a third grader, goes to the cafeteria after his regular school day has ended. He enjoys a healthy snack and then goes to his tutoring session. As Roberto walks into the room, he is greeted by Patricia, an education major who comes to the sessions as part of her elementary methods classes. Patricia and Roberto begin their session with a review of notetaking strategies, followed by reinforcement of math, reading and study skills. Patricia will be beginning her curriculum unit teaching in Roberto's classroom in two weeks. She tells him that she is excited about coming to teach, and he shares a "nifty" science activity that some university students did with his class last year. Roberto continues to talk and says that his mother and he attend Saturday School as Sammons (SSS) and that she's learning English and computer skills. Patricia indicates that she will be at SSS next Saturday to help in the program. Today the university professor and Roberto's teacher stop by to offer encouragement during this session. Other days, they individually observe and offer feedback and engage in reflection with Patricia and Roberto.

The scenario represents a way in which four partners in a community of learners support one another in the educational development of students at the elementary and university level. It further supports the notion that a community learning situation can be mutually beneficial. This type of system serves multiple partners in various avenues which is the ultimate goal of community education (Kinsley,1994). This type of program is a component of

the Sam Houston State University Center for Professional Development [SHCPD](Sam Houston State University, 1995) in collaboration with a federal Title VII Transitional Bilingual Education Grant (¡Queremos Triunfar!, Aldine Independent School District, 1995).

Current evidence in field of education supports the collaboration of schools and universities in the preparation of new teachers (Goodlad, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Holmes Group, 1990; McDermott, Gormely, Rothenberg, & Hammer, 1995; Meade, 1991). Twenty-four university students per semester who are in their senior year are offered field experiences in an urban elementary setting, Sammons Elementary, Aldine Independent School District, Houston, Texas, a campus that is culturally and linguistically diverse. This campus is designated as an Urban Professional Development Site (PDS) for the SHCPD.

The educators at this PDS believe that teachers for the new century must be prepared to take advantage of opportunities which prepare them for authentic teaching. This can happen best if schools and university-based educators demonstrate collaboration and open communication. A key factor in this community is that all partners must see themselves as a component of a learning community comprised of diverse groups focused on providing the best education possible for all students.

In addition to the preparation of new teachers, there must be commitments from the SHCPD which include the school district, the campus, and the university, and the Title VII participants on the campus and two universities to address the need for improvement in

public school student performance. This includes a major effort to engage the parents of linguistically diverse students in the encouragement and support of their children's learning environment. In this project, the university and school are seen as one, not as separate entities, in the educational process. Following are two examples of community learning by which all participants are placed in a winning situation. The first example is a description where in university preservice teachers become a part of a school community by having extended practica in real classroom settings. The second reaches into the community by involving parents in the educational process of their children and at the same time offers parents opportunities for improvement.

University Students on an Urban Elementary Campus

University students or preservice teachers enrolled in a nine hour block of science, social studies, and math methods courses are bridging theory to practice. They are placed for a full semester with a mentor teacher where they learn to instruct children through a particular subject or strategy which is essential to developing authentic learning environments. This concept is supported by the research of Robbins and Patterson (1994) who found that learning to teach in an authentic environment is a developmental process that is sometimes gradual, but always grounded in personal experience. University professors support this process through the sharing of research and theory as the two relate to the practice of teaching. It is in this type of arrangement that theory and practice truly merge. Additionally they assist in the process by providing training for

mentor teachers and by facilitating reflection on curriculum, instruction, student interactions, and student learning.

The university students spend between three and six hours per week in each of their assigned classrooms. They begin by observing mentor teachers as they interact with students. Gradually these future teachers prepare activities and subsequently deliver lessons to the children. Preservice teachers observe mentor teachers and university professors as they demonstrate model lessons. University professors in turn watch lessons that are delivered by mentor teachers and preservice teachers and provide feedback. Reflection and self assessment is conducted on all teaching incidents and is facilitated through video recordings.

In preparing new teachers for the 21st century, the SHCPD believes that future teachers must be technologically proficient. Therefore, technology is integrated is into math and science through the use of teaching tools that incorporate HyperStudio, as well as the Windows of Science laserdisc program by Optical Data. Additionally, all reports and student-developed activities are generated using computer technology and scanners. The computer lab and the Technology Specialist on the elementary campus are available to university students as they prepare lessons and activities for instruction.

The preservice teachers in this project see themselves as a part of the learning community, since their university class meets on the elementary campus and since they work daily in the classrooms. Their plans for teaching and assisting in the classroom are developed directly from the curriculum scope and sequence as defined by their

respective mentor teachers. The planning then becomes a combined effort among university students, mentor teachers, and university professors. Observations and initial work within the classroom give the preservice teachers a foundation for the preparation of the curriculum by their knowing the developmental and functional levels of the elementary students. The curriculum plans are written for a six-day teaching episode in science, math, and social studies and are aligned with the state's essential elements and district curricula. Science and social studies curriculum is developed as an integrated unit, incorporating technology and alternative assessment methodology. Once planning is complete, university students are able to enter the classroom and deliver the lessons in a way they have never been able to before.

The dialogue that occurs during this planning process strengthens the argument for field-based experiences for these future teachers. Within this framework, they experience the advantages and disadvantages of working with a team which is a real component of teaching. In their newfound roles, they express fear and anxiety of the unknown. By the end of the teaching episodes, they share feelings of greater confidence and assurance that they can teach. Following are some of their comments:

> "I never realized what went into curriculum planning and teaching until now. It's a tough job."

> "The most important thing we found in the planning and teaching process is that we learned to listen to each other and draw on each other's strengths. We also were able to see what worked and what didn't work in our plans.

> "We are going to make a conscious effort during student teaching next semester to work as a part of the school community. The understanding of the children, the culture of the school, and the teachers makes a difference in the way we view the curriculum and day-to-day operations of the classroom."

Because Sammons Elementary is an ethnically diverse campus, university students are guided in the process of the development of a multicultural attitude (Lara-Alecio & Rendon, 1995), which further enhances their sense of community. They must think seriously and critically about the development of a multicultural environment. They begin this with a critical essay about their own culture and further clarify their feelings with a university professor. They increase their awareness of other cultures by reading about and discussing other cultures. They are urged to remain open-minded and absorb what is similar and different in cultures. Sensitivity and awareness of cultural patterns are essential in building the multicultural environment. As a part of this development, they must record and observe a lesson where they interact with the students. They must judge themselves as to the their respect, understanding, and response to cultural diversity found among ethnic groups, languages, genders, and exceptionalities (special needs students). They are developing, in essence, an attitude or an ethic of caring.

The ethic of caring is an important concept as the university faculty and preservice teachers provide an added force of instructors who care about quality education for students. A greater degree of individualized instruction for elementary students is supported by having the university preservice teacher in the classroom setting.

Many young students thrive on the attention and encouragement that the university students are offering as evidenced by the following comments from elementary students:

> "I like having you in my classroom because you help me learn better"
>
> "Your activities are so much fun, I really like the Emu eggs and the experiment we did."
>
> "You always smile when you see me."

Six of the university students enrolled in the field-based methods courses are working toward a dual endorsement in bilingual and elementary education. They are able to offer the Sammons Elementary language diverse children support within their own culture and language. They are assigned to bilingual classrooms for the semester. The preservice teachers assist in the bilingual classroom to help teach students to express the individuality of his/her own culture and language. Once field-based experiences were established in bilingual classes, it became evident that we still needed to reach the broader community.

Integrating Parents in the Community of Learners

A need arose to provide potentially English proficient parents in the community with a program which would be more inclusive of them in the educational framework of their children and which would assist them in acquiring the target language, English. Over four semesters we have developed and refined experiences for parent support services. During this time we have involved Sammons

Elementary faculty, two university professors, bilingual preservice teachers, and doctoral students. Preservice teachers along with university professors plan and prepare lessons for the Saturday School at Sammons. Saturday enrichment activities are provided for the parents and their children of all ages at no cost to the family. SSS is federally funded by a bilingual education grant and is fully supported by the elementary school campus. The program has proven its success with an average of 55 parents in attendance each Saturday. The SSS semester is ten consecutive weekends for three hours every Saturday morning. One-half of the parents attend an ESL class for 1.5 hours and then move to a hands-on computer class for the remaining time. The opposite occurs for the other half of the parents.

This joint program between two universities (Sam Houston State University, Curriculum and Instruction Department and Texas A&M University- College Station, Office of Bilingual/ESL Education) not only provides university students laboratory settings for working with potentially English proficient learners, but more importantly contributes to the community learning structure on this campus. Those in this community of learners who benefit from the Saturday program include, but are not limited to, parents and elementary age students as well as undergraduate students and doctoral candidates.

It is significant to note that the parents are learning skills that will improve their socio-economic status. Among the many basic English skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, they are also learning how to write a resumé in Spanish and English and how

to fill out a job application in English. These skills are incorporated in the ESL class and then applied during the computer session.

As a part of the evaluation of this program, interviews were conducted with the parents in attendance to determine what improvements could be made and what benefits these parents were receiving. Parents rated the SSS favorably. Comments made by the parents indicated that this program was significant in their lives and the future of their families:

> "Today I clean buildings, but as long as I try to learn English, my next job will be better."
>
> "My husband and I want to start our own business. We are here to learn computer skills and improve our English. We want a better future for our children."
>
> "When my children see me doing my homework, they want to help. We learn as a family."

The Saturday program for parents appears to be making a difference in the lives of their families. Parents are part of the learning community which emphasizes individual improvement and the goal of life-long learning. Additionally, this program assists the parents in communicating with their children about their school life. By involving and supporting parents, a child is likely to be more successful in school, thus, leading to greater success in the future. Parental encouragement and assistance contribute to students' higher achievement, report card grades, better attitudes, and higher aspirations (Epstein, 1992).

A Winning Situation

Field-based experiences, given the right components, can work in any community. The field-based methods courses and parent involvement program require collaborative actions on the part of all participants. The need is there, the participants are willing, and the benefits apply to all. The types of programs offered by the above examples all have a common theme of collaboration, commitment, and community. These experiences have implications beyond the school system; they demonstrate effective integration of service experiences into the learning process.

Insert Figure 1

Empathy, compromise, reconciliation, and commitment are attributes that each participant must have to contribute to a successful learning community. Participants in the examples offered here bring a set of values or wants that is relevant to the respective participant; each person wants something different out of this community of learners. Success of the program depends on the degree to which each participant is willing to compromise and reconcile values towards the attainment of the whole program (LeCompte, 1995).

Commitment is the activating force in the continued success of this program. Universities are committed to the education of good teachers. School districts are committed to the education of children, and parents are committed to providing a quality future for their

children. All parts together make a unified community that is supportive of the advancement of the child. In this type environment, as a Mayan proverb states, " No one stays behind; all walk together."

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Educational Leadership
Working Constructively With Families Issue

by

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A Community of Learners:

The Winners

<u>Parents</u>

Working with children at home

Attending classes in Spanish and English

Increasing quality time with their children

<u>University Pre-service Teachers</u>

Working with children in real classroom situations

Having the advantage of support from University and School faculty

<u>Children</u>

Receive positive attitudes about education from home and from community

Receive an improved method of education: A collaborative system

<u>University Instructors and School District Personal</u>

Instructors have the opportunity to teach in a real school setting

School district personal have a force of instructors who care about quality education for students

Figure 1